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Faculty

Athena MUTUA *takes on tough issues*

By Nicole Peradotto

When Athena Mutua gets an idea in her head, she runs with it — sometimes literally. After a year of training, Mutua finished her first marathon this summer in Hawaii, raising more than \$4,000 for the American Diabetes Association in the process. With that feat accomplished, she is now taking on a different sort of challenge as one of UB Law's newest associate professors.

An adjunct faculty member since 1997, Mutua is a familiar face around O'Brien Hall. She teaches Corporations, Banking Law, Critical Race Theory, and Power, Privilege and Law, a bridge class surveying civil rights legislation. "Although some of these courses are often seen as 'soft,' in my mind they are very difficult because they are so emotionally charged," says Mutua. "We're tackling some large social issues. If the answers were easy, we would have solved them already."

No matter what class she teaches, Mutua makes a point to emphasize the law's impact on matters of social and economic justice. In the banking course, for example, she explains how certain legislation sharply curtails access to financial services by low-income individuals and families. Mutua wants students to appreciate banks not only as financial institutions, but as community institutions with responsibilities beyond the bottom line.

"What's interesting to me in all of these law courses is: How do we organize a better society and how might law, as a set of institutional and social practices, be useful in that endeavor? For instance, in the corporate and banking law courses I have a chance to explore issues such as the profit motive as a value

system, and whether it should reign unchecked by other needs, goals, and values in our society. I also want students to remember that they can make choices as lawyers and have a positive impact in our society across a wide range of fields even as we debate 'what is positive.' You can do banking law and have a positive impact. You can practice corporate law and make some informed, creative choices that make the world a better place.

"Issues of social and economic justice are not just the purview of courses exploring racism, sexism, class oppression, even as these are very important, but can be explored in all fields. It is not a narrow vision. I like to think that it's a broad and hopeful one."

One of Mutua's current research projects looks at efforts in South Africa to expand financial services to the poor. Banks in that country now offer clients the option of electronic accounts, allowing them to perform all their financial transactions at the ubiquitous ATM.

"The last statistics I read indicated that some South African banks were opening approximately 100,000 electronic accounts a month. It is a very interesting system — and it is profitable. You often hear banks argue that's it is not profitable to offer services to low-income and poor people. That is not a bad argument per se — we want financial institutions to be strong, and profitability is one indication of strength. But I am suggesting that providing services to low-income people is profitable and potentially the right thing to do. We just have to do things differently, including using technology in creative and broadly beneficial ways."

Mutua holds a bachelor's degree in international relations from Earlham College in Indiana; a J.D. from American University, where she also received a master's degree in law in international affairs; and a master's degree in law from Harvard University. After her graduation from Harvard she was appointed



assistant legal counsel in the State of New York Banking Department, where she created a continuing education program and was a member of the advisory board of the Department's Employee Assistance Program. She has also served in a variety of administrative posts at Harvard Law School including five years as director of admissions and financial aid. She is married to professor of law Makau Mutua, director of the Law School's Human Rights Center. They have three pre-teen sons, which helps explain why Mutua speaks so passionately about one of her most recent scholarly endeavors: the topic of black masculinity.

Mutua delved into the subject three years ago, sparked by a discussion of minority incarceration rates that took place during the Critical Race Theory seminar she teaches with UB Law professor Stephanie Phillips. Compelled to take a broader look at how black men are perceived, Mutua talked to colleagues about the issue and researched it extensively. Then, this past spring, with support from the Baldy Center for Law & Social

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Policy, she conceptualized and organized a workshop titled "Black Masculinities: Toward Progressive Conceptions of Black Manhood." The daylong symposium drew 22 distinguished scholars from such disciplines as law, women's studies, African-American studies and sociology.

"The question is: How do black men better live their lives and improve the quality of life for those around them? We already know about the ways in which racism and sexism trip these people up. We

know how buying into dominant notions of masculinity can hurt them and those of us who live with and among them. But we are not interested in just studying the problem. We are interested in exploring, excavating and constructing the progressive practices of black men that are self-enhancing and which enhance the lives of others."

The dialogue is far from over, Mutua notes. This spring the workshop will be expanded to a 2½-day conference. Already, 10 scholars have committed to writing papers on the subject, which Mutua plans to publish in a journal. This area complements her interest in women's issues as manifested in work she is doing as president of the board of Paradise House, an organization that provides housing and programs for women with drug addiction problems. However, referring to the first flash of insight she had into the subject of black masculinities, she says, "See where one moment can take you when you're paying attention?" In the meantime, she's contemplating another marathon next year, too.